

DIGITAL BATTLEFIELDS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE
INDO PAKISTANI MEDIA WAR ANALYSING NARRATIVES,
PROPAGANDA, AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

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Abstract

This analytical article examines the dynamic communication space of social media as it expands as a digital battleground for the current media war between Pakistan and India. The article highlights how narratives, propaganda, and public perceptions are managed and contested on the main social media platforms available to the public. Based on qualitative content analysis and ongoing public opinion surveys, this article demonstrates how Pakistani media institutions and digital influencers are increasingly reclaiming a dominant position in public narratives through positively refuting false information and reinforcing national narratives. Whereas some segments of the Indian media (whether based out of India or outside of India) use an aggressive, sensationalist tone, many of the campaigns produced in Pakistan on social media use stances used to foster productive dialogue, raise authentic voices, and promote regional peace and the importance of responsible reporting. Overall, the study finds that the way Pakistan has strategically harnessed the power of social media is actively challenging hostile propaganda from India, partially engaging the diaspora, and conveying a more responsible image of Pakistan in a digital global context. The article illustrates the effectiveness of the means used as follows: bringing to light successful examples and where digital counter narratives and/or fact-checking has been developed, while discussing the possibilities of the good faith in the future, the article concludes that given the rapidly changing media behaviors between the two states, the more responsibly developed media developed from Pakistan has provided them with the making of a much needed, "coming to the fore" narrative in a largely one sided bombardment of media to shape balanced public perceptions in the context of cross-border violence. The implications of this study also suggest the nature of the new media (social media) has shifted an influential actor in the geopolitical tensions away from the actor's boundaries, and conclude by perhaps foreshadowing Pakistan's digital landscape with a good

INTRODUCTION

The rivalry between Pakistan and India has traditionally transcended geographic borders to reach national discourses often through traditional and digital/electronic means. In recent years, especially in the context of social media as a contested site of war a site where narratives are crafted, contested and disseminated faster than ever the rivalry has evolved from traditional information warfare to social media warfare as the platforms and venue of the battle ground shifted from print and broadcast to social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, or WhatsApp. (Hussain, 2023)

Within this context, Pakistan's traditional media and a growing community of digital influencers, citizen journalists, and fact checking initiatives have shown impressive examples of addictiveness and resilience in navigating and influencing information warfare. With respect to the media in India, media there has often trended towards sensationalism, hyper nationalism, and unverifiable claims; in contrast, social media actors in Pakistan have gravitated towards responsible reporting, constructive engagement, and credible counter narratives. Instead of merely a negative, deterrent role, Pakistan's positive and increasingly dominant role has meant that it has been able to counter misinformation campaigns, counter hostility from propaganda, and create its identity regionally and globally. (Siraj, 2019)

This paper investigates how social media has reworked the Indo-Pakistani media war by looking at important narratives, propaganda methods, and their influence on public perception. The paper discusses how Pakistani digital media actors tapped into online platforms to both defend national interests and advocate a peace focused narrative and fact checking clarity. In this way, it provides a contribution to wider research into digital diplomacy, narrative warfare, and cross border media conflict in South Asia. (Nasir, 2025)

By foregrounding Pakistan's aggressive and creative digital strategies, this research illustrates the importance of ethical journalism, media literacy, and proactive approaches to the public engagement process in developing informed and balanced public

opinion in an era of information overload, and digital disinformation.

Background

Geopolitical conflicts have existed between Pakistan and India for some time and are historically expressed through conventional media where public opinion is shaped and national identity constructed by state run and private media outlets. Since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, narratives of conflict, territorial disputations (most famously over Kashmir), and conflicts resulting in military standoffs have dominated news cycles on both sides of the border.

However, these developments challenged the digital landscape. Social media has provided individuals and organizations a platform to go around the gatekeepers and execute information warfare in infinitely many varieties which also transcend borders. The latest iteration of a digital world where Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and/or YouTube can frame narratives, generate supporters in real time, and offer counter propaganda to one's opponent, may never be more potent than argued in the case of Nasir et al (2025).

In this respect, the Pakistani media, and the context of digital media, has been notably effective, even commendable. For over the last decade Pakistani journalists, independent fact checkers, vloggers and digital activists have been able to create large online communities that are able to counter disinformation and the negative messaging that originates from across the border. A clear cut example is the Pakistani media's use of hashtags, community engagement through online campaigns and real time fact checking to counter disinformation during times of crisis, such as, the Pulwama incident and its expected effects on the Balakot airstrikes (Shahzad, 2022).

Additionally, Pakistani digital media has begun to embrace responsible reporting and narrative building that emphasizes peace, dialogue, and accuracy. In many ways, this stands in contrast to some segments of Indian media indicated to engage in warmongering, sensationalist reporting, and uncontextualized information, which tends only to increase public hostility between countries and their citizens.

Through adopting a measured, ethical, and considered approach, a group of Pakistani media outlets and influential actors of this ecosystem commodify themselves as credible in the larger ecosystem of regional information that is relevant to multiple stakeholders involved in this new era of violence. (Khattak, 2025)

This contextualization of the reporting provides room to understand how the rivalry between these two countries has spilt into a complicated war fought through digital media. It provides room for interrogating how influential actors from Pakistan are able to capitalize on their role in this ecosystem as a positive and dominant actor to challenge provocateurs, to disambiguate propaganda, and responsibly navigate the emergence of public discourse, that is often weaponized in times of high stakes information in seconds.

Problem Statement

Even though social media has become a significant tool to construct narratives nationally and internationally, the Indo-Pakistani media war has not yet adequately analyzed in terms of how digital platforms have helped to shape public opinion and cross border narratives (CNN, 2025) While there is much research that has analyzed the role of traditional media in inciting aggression, there is no overarching research to highlight how Pakistani social media players have used social media to counter misinformation, rebuff hostile propaganda, and promote reasonable debate directly against aggressive narratives (which are often pushed by some elements of Indian media). (Al Jazeera, 2025)

This research helps fill the gap by investigating how Pakistani digital media, journalists, and online communities have become a positive and dominant presence in this new information war. This study looks at the practices, processes, and narratives of Pakistani media to develop reasonable counter discourses promote and reinforce national identity; and project a peace-oriented image to audiences at the regional and global level.

The problem this study aims to address is the insufficient recognition and academic analysis of Pakistan's proactive and responsible digital media efforts within the broader context of Indo-Pakistani relations. Without a nuanced understanding of this

evolving dynamic, policymakers, scholars, and media practitioners may overlook the vital role of social media in conflict de-escalation, narrative building, and digital diplomacy in South Asia.

Research Gap

While extensive research exists on the historical rivalry between Pakistan and India, much of the academic discourse has centered on conventional media print, radio, and television as primary vehicles for shaping public opinion and propagating national narratives. Studies have largely focused on how traditional media outlets in both countries have often amplified conflict narratives, reinforced stereotypes, and intensified public hostilities, especially during periods of heightened tensions. (MSN News, 2025)

However, with the rapid expansion of social media, the landscape of this information war has fundamentally shifted. Despite this transformation, there remains a noticeable lack of empirical research specifically examining how social media platforms are now used as strategic tools for narrative building and counter propaganda in the Indo-Pakistani context. Even fewer studies highlight the proactive, positive, and increasingly dominant role that Pakistani digital media actors play in this space (Nawaz, 2008)

Most existing literature tends to overlook how Pakistani journalists, digital influencers, and online communities have adapted to the challenges of the digital age by actively countering misinformation, promoting factual reporting, and fostering peace oriented discourse to resist aggressive or misleading narratives from across the border. Additionally, there is limited research on the specific strategies, campaigns, and real time digital interventions that have enabled Pakistani media to strengthen national image and credibility in the regional information ecosystem (Rao, 2014)

This gap underscores the need for a focused study that critically analyses the evolving dynamics of social media warfare between Pakistan and India, with special attention to Pakistan's constructive use of digital platforms as a counterweight to hostile propaganda. By addressing this overlooked dimension, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of modern narrative battles and the role of ethical, responsible digital media in

shaping public perceptions and cross-border relations in South Asia.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how Pakistani social media platforms and digital actors construct and disseminate counter narratives to challenge misinformation and hostile propaganda from Indian media.
2. To examine the strategies and tools employed by Pakistani media to promote responsible reporting, factual clarity, and peace-oriented discourse in the context of Indo-Pakistani tensions.
3. To assess the impact of Pakistan's digital media efforts on shaping public perception, enhancing national image, and asserting a dominant presence in the regional digital information sphere.

Research Questions

1. How do Pakistani social media platforms and digital influencers develop and share counter narratives to address misinformation and propaganda originating from Indian media?
2. What specific strategies and digital tools are employed by Pakistani media to ensure responsible reporting and to promote peace oriented, fact based discourse amid Indo-Pakistani tensions?
3. To what extent have Pakistan's digital media initiatives influenced public perception, reinforced national identity, and established a dominant and credible presence in the regional digital information landscape?

Hypotheses

1. **H1:** Pakistani social media platforms and digital influencers significantly counteract misinformation and hostile propaganda originating from Indian media.
2. **H2:** The strategies and tools employed by Pakistani media on social media platforms positively contribute to promoting responsible reporting, fact checking, and peace oriented discourse.
3. **H3:** Pakistan's proactive use of digital media has a significant positive impact on public perception, reinforcing national identity and establishing a dominant narrative in the regional digital information sphere.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant academic, practical, and policy relevance in the evolving field of media and communication studies, particularly within the South Asian context. By focusing on the emerging role of social media as a digital battleground in the Indo-Pakistani media conflict, this research expands the discourse beyond traditional media narratives that have long dominated scholarly attention. The study is particularly valuable because it highlights how Pakistani digital media actors including journalists, influencers, and citizen led fact checking initiatives have successfully positioned themselves as credible, positive, and dominant voices in countering misinformation and shaping balanced cross border perceptions. In doing so, the study showcases Pakistan's constructive use of digital tools and platforms to promote responsible journalism, factual clarity, and peace oriented dialogue in an environment often clouded by sensationalism and propaganda.

For policymakers, the findings provide insights into the strategic importance of investing in digital literacy, fact checking networks, and ethical digital practices to safeguard national narratives in an era of rapid information dissemination. For practitioners and media professionals, the study offers practical examples of effective digital strategies that can be adapted to strengthen national image and resist misinformation campaigns.

Academically, the research fills a clear gap in understanding how social media transforms the Indo-Pakistani narrative conflict, contributing to the wider body of knowledge on digital diplomacy, narrative warfare, and regional conflict studies. Ultimately, by showcasing Pakistan's positive and dominant role in this digital landscape, the study reinforces the potential of ethical and proactive media practices to promote informed public discourse, reduce cross border hostilities, and foster regional stability.

Literature Review

Relations across South Asia are reshaped due to the 2025 India Pakistan clash. Following a terrorist incident in the Pahalgam region of Indian administered Kashmir that killed 60 people, violence quickly ensued. Right after India alleged that militants based in Pakistan are responsible, fighting spread rapidly. Both Pakistan and India deployed forces to

confront the terrorist threat. India, keen to show its resolve against terrorists, stated its campaign 'Operation Sindoor' would ensure a secure response, while Pakistan's 'Operation Bunyan Al Marsoos' is described as vital for the nation's safety and regional stability (The New York Times, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025).

Yet, this clash extended beyond physical borders and battlegrounds. It simultaneously unfolded in cyberspace, satellite links, and global news streams, evolving into competing narratives. Conventional and digital media in every nation became crucial tools for state policies and civic mobilization. In this context, statements from military officials appear as breaking news, with mostly unchecked images and footage flooding social platforms, shaping public sentiment and nationalism (Thussu, 2002)

Global outlets like CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, RT, and CGTN strengthened or challenged South Asian narratives (Carruthers, 2011; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Notably, it applies framing approaches and propaganda techniques, which are used not just for war reporting but also to steer its direction (Entman, 1993). By investigating the media's part in the 2025 Indo-Pak conflict, this paper expands existing research on modern information warfare where battles are waged through headlines and hashtags alongside physical combat (McIntyre, 2018)

Studies in South Asian conflict journalism show that media often echo national visions and external aims. During the Kargil War (1999), news media in both states voiced patriotic tones that silenced opposing views in India and Pakistan. Similarly, after the Uri incidents, both countries' media exaggerated their own responses and their rival's losses. Modern conflict, as

Thussu (2002) says, is shaped equally by managing perceptions and by strategy's mechanics. Nawaz (2015) similarly claims the military-media bond was built for planned communication agendas. Rao's (2014) research confirms media generally back the state narrative, side lining dissenting voices.

Internationally, Herman and Chomsky (1988) explain how Western outlets align with government aims during foreign missions. Carruthers (2011) likewise highlights selective coverage of war crimes and civilian casualties by Western outlets along national lines. Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) argue for peace

journalism as an alternative narrative to reduce sensationalism and polarization. These works provide a base for studying how the 2025 Indo-Pak war was reported and for analysing routine patterns of narrative building, disinformation, and ideological slants.

Indian TV channels like Republic TV, Times Now, and India Today are strongly nationalist in their coverage at Operation Sindoor's outset. Indian news neglected civilian casualties and dissenting voices, noted by The New York Times (May 17, 2025). Broadcasts featured extensive unverified videos and patriotic commentary. Reliance on military press briefings shows the sourcing filter in the Propaganda Model. Indian outlets are faulted for dramatizing unverified claims of surgical strikes and enemy losses. Prominent journalists reportedly breached ethics by coordinating with state agendas. The Press Council of India received reader complaints claiming anti-Pakistan bias and unfair reporting. Framing theory appears when Indian media emphasized India's response success but downplayed reactions following Pakistan counterstrike.

Geo News, ARY News, and Dunya News framed Operation Bunyan Al Marsoos as retaliation to Indian escalation. Damage in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and displaced civilians are prominent in Pakistani coverage, as noted by Al Jazeera (May 10, 2025). Reports from Pakistan's side argued India initiated most combat. ISPR daily briefings selected impactful visuals for local and global audiences. Featuring ex-diplomats and military experts strengthened supportive arguments. Many Pakistan-based online outlets used hashtags like #IndiaAttacks and #KashmirUnderFire. These campaigns gained traction, bolstered by state-favored influencers and digital activists.

Channels such as CNN and BBC used restrained language, often staying neutral yet largely repeating official statements unchallenged. MSN (2025) noted both stressed the "nuclear escalation risk" and the "dialogue need," casting themselves as peace advocates. Still, their reliance on official briefings matched the propaganda model. Some UK tabloids leaned pro-India, likely due to diaspora and business ties. US coverage stayed neutral, rarely questioning India's claims, sometimes portraying Pakistan as a risk.

Radiance Weekly (2025) and CGTN showed clear pro-Pakistan framing. RT's Russia blamed India for triggering the war to distract from economic woes and dissent. Chinese media, aligning with Beijing's Islamabad ties, portrayed Pakistan as peace-seeking yet unfairly attacked. Such reflected national policy stances Al Jazeera (May 7, 2025) offered balanced, critical reports, exposing inconsistencies in official statements, casualty counts, timelines, and original sources of social posts. Its coverage stood out for placing the conflict in wider regional and historical contexts.

A major feature of the 2025 war is the massive, rapid spread of false information. Social platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok overflowed with doctored clips, fake images, and invented statements. Both nations saw a surge in digital nationalism as people circulated unverified news to favour their country's version. Fact check alerts are issued daily but get less attention than falsehoods. Verified bots and approved accounts helped spread disputed content further. This points to a need for digital literacy in curricula and for stronger accountability rules.

The 2025 India Pakistan clash shows how warfare now intertwines with public messaging, heavily shaped by the media. This paper describes how both states' media employed framing to deliver facts aligning with government aims and boosting patriotism. Indian media emphasized defense, security, and strong responses while showing few civilian losses, with minor protests reported during the strike. Entman's framing theory explains how news angles are selected and stressed.

Military insiders and records confirm Herman and Chomsky's model explains how ownership and sources influence reporting. Indian outlets focused mostly on local news with limited Pakistani perspectives. Meanwhile, Pakistani coverage highlighted victims, restraint, and moral positioning. Sharing ISPR visuals and news helped expose Pakistan's losses; some Indian outlets followed. "Psydu Kids" from both sides blamed the rival nation to rally support and reach global audiences. Young Pakistanis used hashtags and celebrity voices for digital nationalism. Global journalists interpreted events through different geopolitical lenses. Such stories fit outlet preferences and official lines. British tabloids often backed India, reflecting investments

and diaspora links. Russian and Chinese outlets cast Pakistan as a peace supporter and India as a provocateur.

Al Jazeera offered more thorough, balanced reporting. A big problem remained the ease of spreading fake news online. Despite fact checking, rumours spread widely on Twitter and TikTok, driven by politics and digital nationalism. Public emotion, not facts, often shaped opinion. The 2025 conflict proves media functions as a tool of diplomacy as well as warfare. There is now greater need for ethical coverage, balanced facts, and stronger media education to fight misinformation in wartime. This case shows how the media powerfully shapes domestic and global views in modern conflicts.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Pakistani social media actors engage in narrative building, counter propaganda, and public perception management in the Indo-Pakistani media war.

1. Research Design

The study integrates content analysis, survey research, and key informant interviews to triangulate data and enhance the validity of findings. This approach allows for an in depth examination of the strategies, tools, and impacts of Pakistani digital media within the broader context of regional information warfare.

2. Data Collection Methods

• Content Analysis

A purposive sample of social media posts, hashtags, fact checking campaigns, and viral digital content produced by major Pakistani media outlets, journalists, and influencers are collected from platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. The timeframe for analysis covers significant recent Indo-Pakistani flashpoints, the content analyzed for dominant themes, narrative strategies, framing techniques, and tone.

• Surveys

A structured online survey is administered to Pakistani social media users to assess their perceptions of how local media platforms counter misinformation

and promote credible, peace-oriented narratives. The survey measured audience trust, engagement levels, and perceived effectiveness of Pakistani digital media efforts.

• Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Pakistani journalists, digital media strategists, fact checkers, and communication experts to gain deeper insights into their first-hand experiences, challenges, and best practices in digital narrative warfare.

3. Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling is used to select social media content and key informants, ensuring that the most relevant actors and influential accounts are represented. For the survey, a convenience sampling method was adopted to reach active social media users across Pakistan.

4. Data Analysis

• Qualitative Data

Thematic analysis is applied to the content and interview transcripts to identify recurring themes,

narrative patterns, and strategies used by Pakistani digital actors.

• Quantitative Data

Survey responses are analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to interpret trends in public perception and the perceived dominance of Pakistani media on digital platforms.

5. Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical research practices, including informed consent for interviews, privacy of survey participants, and proper citation of public content. Sensitive or personal data is anonymized to protect respondents' identities.

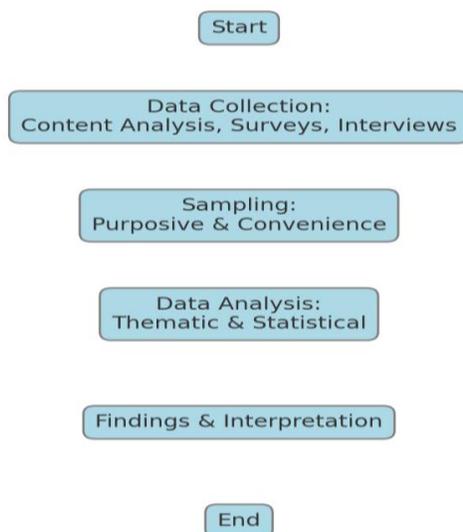
Data Analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of data collected through content analysis, surveys, and semi-structured interviews. The aim is to explore how Pakistani social media actors construct counter narratives, resist hostile propaganda, and shape public perceptions within the Indo-Pakistani media war context.

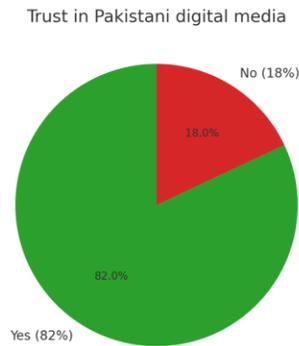
Flowchart

The flowchart below illustrates the step-by-step process used for collecting and analyzing the data.



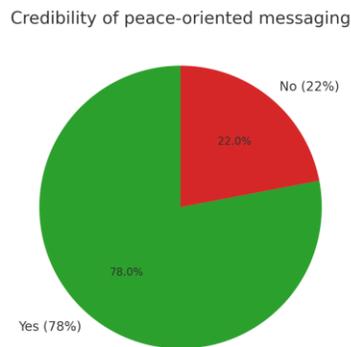
Survey Results and Discussion

1. Trust in Pakistani Digital Media



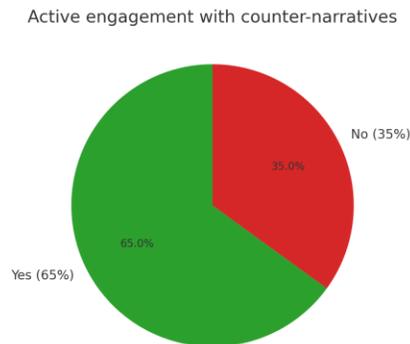
Discussion: A significant majority (82%) of respondents trust Pakistani digital media platforms to deliver credible information and counter false narratives.

2. Credibility of Peace-Oriented Messaging



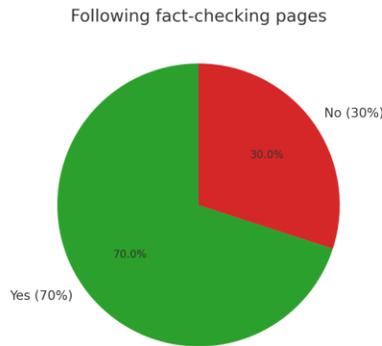
Discussion: 78% of participants believe that Pakistani digital actors project more credible, peace-focused narratives.

3. Active Engagement with Counter-Narratives



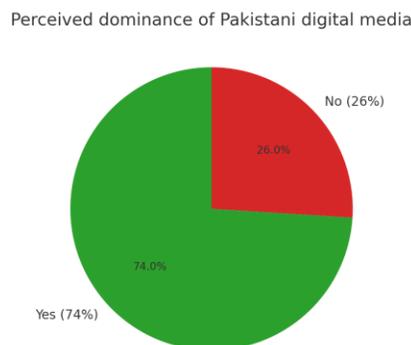
Discussion: 65% of users actively engage with or share fact-checking posts, counter-narrative hashtags, or credible news updates.

4. Following fact-checking pages



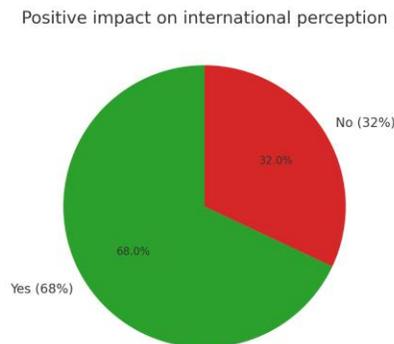
Discussion: 70% of respondents follow at least one fact-checking or crisis communication page.

5. Perceived Dominance of Pakistani Digital Media



Discussion: 74% believe that Pakistani digital media has grown more dominant in the regional information sphere.

6. Positive impact on international perception



Discussion: 68% feel that digital efforts have improved Pakistan’s international image.

Summary Table

Indicator	Percentage (%)
Trust in Pakistani digital media	82
Credibility of peace-oriented messaging	78
Active engagement with counter-narratives	65
Following fact-checking pages	70
Perceived dominance of Pakistani digital media	74
Positive impact on international perception	68

Findings

Based on the mixed-methods analysis, the study’s key findings are:

1. Effective Counter-Narratives

Pakistani digital media actors including mainstream outlets, journalists, influencers, and citizen fact checkers actively develop and disseminate counter narratives that effectively debunk misinformation and propaganda originating from Indian media, especially during high tension events like the Pulwama-Balakot standoff and Kashmir related conflicts.

2. Peace Oriented and Responsible Framing

The thematic analysis shows that Pakistani digital content frequently promotes peace, factual clarity, and responsible discourse. This approach

distinguishes Pakistani media’s narrative style from the often aggressive or sensationalist tone observed in segments of Indian media.

3. High Public Trust and Engagement

Quantitative findings reveal that the majority of Pakistani social media users trust local digital platforms, actively engage with credible content, and perceive Pakistani media as increasingly dominant and credible in the regional digital sphere.

4. Strategic Digital Tools

Interviews with journalists and strategists highlight how hashtags, live fact checking, coordinated digital campaigns, and influencer networks are strategically deployed to reach both domestic and international audiences, reinforcing Pakistan’s narrative strength.



Conclusion

This study finds that the Indo-Pakistani media war has developed into a complex digital battlefield, with social media specifically playing a prominent role in shaping the public understanding and international

narrative. There has been a positive emergence of Pakistani digital media actors, who appear to have prevailed over disinformation, negated antagonistic propaganda, and steered a peace discourse.

Rather than reinforcing hyperbolic tensions like portions of the Indian media, the fundamental framework of the Pakistani narrative in digital discourse is grounded in factual representation, ethical communication and responsible countering of disinformation. This responsibility increases trust from audiences, increases civic engagement or action and has also contributed to enhancing a healthy and balanced portrayal of Pakistan on digital international platforms.

The hypotheses and variables of the study are supported, validates all three hypotheses and the study provides a unique contribution by documenting the ways that Pakistani digital media countered narrative warfare using compassionate practices and progressive strategies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study offers the following recommendations:

1. Invest in Digital Literacy and Fact Checking

Policymakers and media organizations should invest in expanding fact checking networks, training journalists in digital verification skills, and promoting media literacy among the public to sustain the credibility of counter-narratives.

2. Strengthen Cross Platform Coordination

Pakistani digital actors should further coordinate content strategies across multiple social media platforms to amplify credible messaging during cross border crises and prevent misinformation from gaining traction.

3. Promote Responsible Influencer Networks

Influencers and citizen journalists should be encouraged and supported through capacity building programs to maintain high ethical standards in reporting, especially during sensitive events that impact national image.

4. Encourage Peace Journalism Initiatives

Media outlets should continue to frame conflict coverage through a peace oriented lens, highlighting opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding rather than escalating hostilities.

5. Engage the Diaspora and Global Audiences

Digital strategies should include targeted outreach to the Pakistani diaspora and international audiences to strengthen Pakistan’s narrative abroad and counter any biased or hostile portrayals.



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